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SELF-MEASUREMENT BY ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL PUPILS

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Detroit, Michigan

Captain Carpenter of the "Vindictive," in his epic story of the blocking of the Zeebrugge Channel to shut in the German submarines, remarked modestly that the main difference between the British navy and the German navy during the war was that the British navy had traditions and the German navy had none. When our American boys went "over there," those who had been trained in our public schools were inspired by a spirit which the public schools had fostered and cherished for generations. The great words of our great men have echoed continuously in these schools for more than a hundred years.

To produce writers and poets is as much the business of education as to produce scientists and soldiers. It is inconceivable that a poet should not some day immortalize the flights across the Atlantic which have kindled the world's imagination. It is only as they are so immortalized that great events are rightly appreciated. Effective expression of their spirit in words is the necessary counterpart of great deeds. It is "the mint mark which gives currency" and enables deeds to fulfil their mission.

To train to effective speech is then a patriotic duty. How much can we do in the elementary schools to further this aim?

We must ask ourselves first of all how men have really learned to write. It is here that we must search for right methods. Fortunately we are not without evidence. Benjamin Franklin's account of his self-training in composition is well known. Comparison and self-measurement marked the process at every step. Robert Burns, also, has left a vivid picture of his own ascent, step by step, in his struggle to attain literary craftsmanship. Poor as his family was he had access to a small number of good books, prose and poetry, and was influenced by them from his earliest years. Among the

few he knew well as a boy were Allan Ramsay's poems and a collection of English songs. "The collection of songs," he says, "was my *vade mecum*. I pored over them, driving my cart, or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender, or sublime, from affectation and fustian."

For practice in composition, Burns, when he was about twenty years old, engaged several of his school fellows to keep up a literary correspondence with him. He had met with a collection of letters by the wits of Queen Anne's reign and he pored over them most devoutly. "I kept copies of any of my own letters that pleased me," he says, "and a comparison between them and the composition of most of my correspondents flattered my vanity."

After ten years or more of this occasionally interrupted, but nevertheless steady, progress in technique came the opportunity for a modest first appearance as an author. Burns said afterward of his feelings at this time: "I weighed myself alone; I balanced myself with others; I watched every means of information to see how much ground I occupied as a man and a poet. . . . I can say that *pauvre inconnu* as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and of my works as I have at this moment when the public has decided in their favor."

It is a wonderful story of achievement, full of lessons for the teacher. Our methods must be based on truth, and where shall we find truth if not in such records as these? The lesson to be drawn from them is that children must be taught to help themselves. They themselves must make comparisons and see differences, and they are quite able to do these things. Even very little children are keen critics of language possibilities and effects. I once heard a four-year-old girl interrupt the telling of "Jack and the Beanstalk" at a critical moment in the story. It was at the point where Jack jumps into the chest to hide from the giant. She had probably heard the story before, and when the narrator, a brother a little older than herself, failed to give this critical moment its proper effect she broke in excitedly, "And not a minute too twit! Say that, Frank, 'Not a minute too twit!'"

Everyone who has tried to tell stories to little children knows that they are critical and that the stories must be well told to meet

their approval. They have a feeling for coherence, for climax, and for diction. Single words affect them strongly. They are sensitive to the sound of a word even when they do not know its meaning. The self-teaching process is in nothing more evident than in the way they acquire language before they come to school. The process goes on after they enter school, although teaching-methods may take little account of it. Not long ago a fifth-grade teacher told me of this little incident: Her pupils had just finished a piece of written work and she said to them impressively: "Now, I want you to put these papers away and preserve them carefully, for I have a *premonition* that you will need them." Then she said suddenly, "What is a premonition?" A little boy right under her hand, as she expressed it, said instantly, "It's a hunch." He was getting at language in the natural way, through context and situation.

He who really learns teaches himself. It is an old truth, but new for everyone who rediscovers it. The use of a composition scale by pupils is only an incident in this larger process of self-training.

The use of the Trabue Scale by pupils for evaluating their own composition was not really a startling innovation in Detroit. It fitted in naturally with prevailing methods designed to develop judgment and discrimination. For a number of years teachers of elementary schools have met regularly to observe lessons in reading and composition. Pupils have taken an active part in these lessons, commenting upon compositions, expressing appreciation, and suggesting improvements. Two years ago the Board of Education printed a pamphlet of compositions which had been compiled by a committee of teachers. A number of these were rated by the Department of Educational Research and the Department of English. Through the courtesy of Professor Thorndike, a set of ten compositions with ratings from his collection was also included. This pamphlet has been used by teachers to train themselves in scoring and, to some extent, to accustom pupils to compare quality in composition. Even third-grade children enjoy comparing compositions and noting differences. The two which follow were read to a third-grade class for this purpose:

THE THOUGHTFUL CONDUCTOR

One Saturday morning I was going to my cousins. I took a Fort Street car. The car started. After two minutes the car stopped. In came an old woman. There was no seat for her. In a moment the conductor went and tapped a man on the shoulder. He said, "Will you let this lady have your seat?" The man said, "Certainly." When I reached home I told my mother about it. She said, "He was a good conductor." That is what I call a thoughtful conductor.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN
245 MCGRAW AVENUE
December 16, 1915

DEAR SANTA CLAUS:

I want a cowboy suit for Christmas, some nuts, a little candy, an orange and an apple.

I am writing back to you as you told me to in your postscript.

We have some pictures of you in our school room, and indeed they look very nice.

Our teacher has made some pictures on the wall which she did her ownself. She did it with chalk, perhaps you saw your picture this morning when you wrote that nice little letter.

I was surprised when I saw your letter written so neatly. Miss S—— told us to write to you and here is the letter for you with lots of love. If I find any poor boys or girls I will let you know.

Very sincerely,
JOHN EVANS

After the first reading of these compositions by the teacher, the children were asked which one they preferred. They were pretty evenly divided. Those who preferred the first gave as a reason that they liked the subject. Several who expressed a preference for the Santa Claus letter said that the sentences were better. One little girl remarked that she did not think "her ownself" was good English. There is, it seems to me, a great deal of significance and of suggestion for the teacher in these comments.

The Trabue Extension of the Hillegas Scale has been used so far only in higher grades and in only a small number of schools. Pupils have not usually been provided with individual copies of the scale and their training in its use has been largely oral. A composition from the scale has been read aloud and then a pupil's composition, and the class has been asked to compare them. Errors which cannot be detected from hearing compositions read

are sometimes detected by the reader or by the teacher, who may glance at the composition while it is being read.

The greater part of the Trabue Scale is quite well adapted for use in grammar grades. The compositions offer a simple basis for comparisons, and pupils themselves are able to understand the reasons for the ratings.

In his analysis of the development of ability in English composition as represented by the samples in the Hillegas Scale, Mr. Courtis enumerates (1) the mechanics of writing, (2) organization, and (3) literary quality as main characteristics. These three characteristics, as they appear in the samples of the Trabue Scale, are readily grasped by pupils in elementary grades, and the scale focuses attention upon them. Teachers in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades who have allowed pupils to use the scale occasionally for rating their own compositions say that they have found the practice stimulating and helpful for the following reasons:

a) The objective character of the standards appeals strongly to pupils.

b) Pupils like a definite mark, and they like to understand, as clearly as possible, why this mark is given.

c) Pupils are able to understand the ratings of the scale, which rest upon differences in organization, diction (including sentence structure), spelling, and punctuation.

d) Judgment is developed by comparing compositions and discussing reasons for ratings. Pupils thus acquire the right attitude toward self-improvement. Those who find themselves in the 50 to 60 class are anxious to move up into the 60 to 70 class. One seventh-grade boy said, "The scale makes you know you've got to get down to hard work." Another said that the old marks, 1, 2, 3, 4, given by the teacher didn't mean anything to him. Ratings according to the scale did mean something.

How accurately do pupils who have received some training use the scale for scoring their own and their classmates' compositions?

A seventh-grade class had been studying Wordsworth's poem "The Daffodils." They had enjoyed the poem so much that their teacher asked them to write about "memory pictures" of their own. Here are a few of them, uncorrected:

RAINBOW FALLS

While camping in Glacier Park last summer our party happened along a trail which ran through a forest of great cedars. As we proceeded my ear was suddenly caught by the faint tinkling of water which gradually grew louder.

As we emerged from this forest a most beautiful sight met our eyes, a tiny water-fall which fell from the snow-capped brow of a cliff so high up that it turned to a fine spray that shone like myriads of diamonds.

This picture was so impressive that it will remain in my mind as long as I live.

A SUNSET ON THE LAKE

I was on the upper deck of the steamer City of Detroit III, when my mother beckoned for me to come forward.

There was a beautiful sight that I shall never forget. The sun was just sinking in the west leaving a golden pathway on the rippling waves. We watched it disappear until only the red glow was left.

Whenever anyone speaks of beautiful scenes this one flashes upon me.

THE FOUR HORSES' HEADS

About three months ago I was in the Art Museum and happened to see Rosa Bonheur's picture of the four horses' heads.

I admired the heads with their big brown eyes in which you could see spirit, pride, and intelligence. They looked as if no one could master them. I felt as if the horses were alive—their manes heaving, their heads moving and eyes flashing.

A MEMORY PICTURE

While I was sailing on the Hudson River one moonlight night, I went on the upper deck of the ship to enjoy the fresh air.

I was on the deck for about a half hour when looking towards the bank, I saw great white mansions overlooking the river. With the moon shining on them, they looked like great marble castles of the old ages. I gazed at them until the moon disappeared behind some clouds.

I was overjoyed on being able to see the beautiful houses on the Hudson on a moonlight night.

Whenever anyone talks about sights they have seen, I recall the picture I saw on the Hudson.

This class, consisting of seventeen pupils, scored the compositions, each scoring his own. In this case, each member of the class had been provided with a copy of the scale. I had previously scored the papers and they were scored also by Mr. Courtis.

Following are the scores for the class, the pupils' own ratings coming first, Mr. Courtis' second, and mine last:

	Pupil	C	B
1.....	68	75	70
2.....	72	70	70
3.....	73	75	68
4.....	70	65	65
5.....	68	70	70
6.....	70	65	65
7.....	68	70	72
8.....	65	70	65
9.....	71	65	65
10.....	72	65	65
11.....	72	65	70
12.....	72	70	70
13.....	72	70	70
14.....	67	70	65
15.....	72	70	68
16.....	70	70	74
17.....	68	70	64

These seventeen papers are short, simple, and not difficult to mark. Pupils' scores do not differ materially from the other two.

The influence of scoring by pupils on growth in composition ability is of course indirect. No definite statement on this subject is here attempted. All that can be said at this time is that good teachers who have used the scale in this way have found that it stimulates interest. Pupils like matching their own compositions with objective standards and they see more definitely in this way what they must do to deserve higher scores. The use of the scale does not, of course, do away with the necessity for the occasional correction of papers by the teacher, but it lightens the burden of correction and throws more of the responsibility on the pupil. It helps him to help himself.

Under the direction of the careful, intelligent teacher, this rating of compositions relegates itself to its proper place in the whole process of training. The compositions of the scale are not regarded as models, but as stages to be passed in the ascent, step by step, to higher levels. The upper end of the scale places the goal far enough ahead.